

# God's Gift of Community

## Theme

One of the best gifts of community is the way it nurtures and sustains us. As Christians, we are each called by Christ to encourage and support one another. This session explores how our individual gifts help make each group or gathering, a place where others can be nurtured and grow.

### Life Issue

How do we nurture and support each other?

## Community Building & Opening Question

- What's your favorite "comfort food?"
- Do you have a favorite childhood memory? What makes it a favorite for you?
- Tell about one of your childhood heroes. Why was that person a hero for you?

## Opening Prayer

Lord, you called your followers together in Christian community when you walked the earth. Gather us together today, so that we may grow closer to each other and closer to you. Be present with us, as we are present to one another. Guide us and renew us with your love and grace. Amen.

## What does the Bible say?

### Romans 12:3-8

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

### 1 Thessalonians 5:11

Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

## What do others say?

One of the things I remember most vividly about visiting my grandparents' home as a small child is the backyard garden filled with peony bushes and their enormous lush pink blossoms. As I walk through my neighborhood, it is the peonies, poised at the threshold between sidewalk and yard that consistently draw my eyes and feet toward an extraordinary garden. Then, nose deep into the soft flower, I inhale the subtly sweet fragrance of the peony and am once again filled with memories of my grandmother—not so much memories of her backyard garden, but of the fullness of her impact on my life.

My grandmother's gift was the ability to make each of her grandchildren feel like the most special child. She had a knack for getting each one of us to talk to her and tell her all the things in our heart that we wouldn't tell our parents. She delighted with us in our adventures, our loves, and our accomplishments, and consoled us in our losses and disappointments. She did all of this through careful listening and her devilish smile as we walked or played cards or sat around the breakfast table drinking cocoa and eating toast. My grandma had a way of tending to us that allowed us to flourish as individuals and created deep connections not just with her, but throughout our extended family.

Christian community requires tending no less than a child's relationship with a grandmother or the lavish neighborhood garden that is home to my memory-inducing peonies. It is easy to think that Christian community should form naturally; this is Church, for goodness sake, we should all be able to get along because we are Christians, we believe in Jesus. But the truth is—though we believe in Jesus, we are not Jesus. We do many things that separate us from God, from our true selves, and from one another. It is one thing to be individual Christians gathered together as a community—where ultimately we are still focused on what we, as individuals, will gain. It is another thing to be part of a Christian community where the focus is not simply on the other, but on the web of relationships that gives the community strength and dimension.

In Romans 12, Paul writes, "so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another." That is to say, in Christ—in Christian community—each member belongs to all the others. We are simultaneously individuals *and* part of something greater than ourselves. This kind of Christian community doesn't come without effort. So how do we nurture this kind of Christian community? First of all, we each have needs; and, according to Paul, we each "have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us (Romans 12:6a)." Each person is called to be their best self in the Christian community, to be allowed to use his or her gifts with integrity in service to others and "according to the grace given to us." So, we nurture the community by tending to the members, each according to their needs, and each of us according to our gifts.

The further challenge of Christian community is not so much tending the relationships with those with whom we already have affinity, but tending the relationships with those who are also one with us in the body of Christ, but that we are not immediately drawn to. It is like the garden in my neighborhood: its beauty and richness comes from the diversity of individual plants. It is a beautiful garden because of the way the different flowers, shrubs, grasses, and trees come together as something more than the sum of its parts. If only the peonies (my personal favorite) were nurtured and cared for, the rest of the garden would wither; and so with Christian community we recognize that we must tend all the members for the whole community to be healthy and fruitful.

Nurturing the community is not about one-time events. You can't just plant the garden and expect it to flourish without care. So it is in community. Although responding to crisis and celebration is important, what is more important is the quiet persistence and diligence of caring for one another as part of the daily or weekly rhythm. The process of prayerfully discerning who needs what gifts is also part of that rhythm, and often, that comes through careful listening and sincere conversation—whether it is over a nice cup of cocoa and toast at my grandmother's breakfast table or over a cup of coffee at dinner. The quiet persistence is the place where we, as Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 5:11, "encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing." You may not see immediate rewards, but with patience and compassion the relationship will begin to open and flourish, much like the peony whose blossom begins as a tight, hard ball before unfolding into the fullness of its beauty.

The beauty of the garden is sustained throughout the summer, and indeed throughout the year as the rhythm of its members is revealed. The garden is constantly changing as different plants blossom and bear fruit at different times and each in turn is allowed the opportunity to offer its gifts and strengths to the whole. So it is in Christian community as we lovingly nurture and tend one another in Christ's name.

### ***Think About...***

- Tell about a time when you felt really affirmed and encouraged. How did it feel? How did it make a difference in your life?
- When have you had the opportunity to nurture or encourage someone else? Did you ever find out whether it made a difference in that person's life? What difference did encouraging someone else make in your life?
- What makes it difficult to work for the good of the community rather than for our own interests?
- When have you been part of a group or team where you felt that your gifts were valued and needed? How did you feel about the other members of that group? What gifts did they bring to contribute to your sense of community?
- What are some common ways that we build up and encourage each other?

### ***What's my response? Select one or more ideas...***

- Pray daily for the members of your group. If you have a photo of your group, post it in a prominent place to help you remember group members in prayer.
- Practice really listening when people are talking to you. Focus on what the person is saying rather than on your response to the person. Choose someone to whom you want to begin listening more carefully.
- Barnabas was a great supporter and encourager for the apostle Paul. He was designated "Son of Encouragement" in the early church. Read about Barnabas (Acts 4:37, Acts 9:27, Acts 11, Acts 13, Acts 15, 1 Corinthians 9:6, Galatians 2:1 and 9, Galatians 2:13, and Colossians 4:10). Make a list of qualities that Barnabas had that you would like to develop.
- Try to say something encouraging to someone each day during this month.
- Write out the text from 1 Thessalonians 5:11 and carry it with you as a reminder of God's desire for us to nurture and support each other in community.

### ***Closing Prayer***

God, you take such amazing care of us. We thank you for the people in our lives who have encouraged and nurtured us. Keep reminding us that we should also do that for others. We ask for hearts and spirits to share your love with all people, not just those to whom we are close. Thanks for the blessing each person in this group has been for us today. We pray in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

*Reflection written by Jeanne Hartfield*

*Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America.*

*Connecting in Grace™: Energized © 2013 Incarnation Lutheran Church*